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SEVERAL months ago, as the editorial team huddled in our favourite cafe, we decided unanimously that we needed an issue highlighting professions that, for various reasons, were not top of mind for most. With our shared passion for movies, this issue is centred on the many things we may or may not know about the industry.

Our first act stars none other than Johan Mahmood Merican – the man who I am told, inspired our Movie Wisdom column – and (I mean this in the best possible way) big hairy feet. Johan masterfully draws leadership lessons from The Lord of the Rings, and (I mean this in the best possible way) big hairy feet. Johan says this issue is centred on the many things we may or may not know about the industry.

Our next act stars David Kwong – magic consultant for movies like Now You See Me, The Incredible Burt Wonderstone and The Imitation Game! As puzzle creator for national publications in the United States (as well as the movie The Immigrant), singer and a Harvard man – helping us understand how we can apply to direct how your story plays out.

Here are three fundamental points you can apply to direct how your story ends:

**PASSION:**
GIVE YOUR BEST
With every script you have prepared, get into your role and put your best foot forward. With that in mind, be mindful to work your strengths to your advantage.

**PERSEVERANCE:**
ENVISION YOUR DESTINATION
How do you envision the ending of your movie? Would it be dramatic, serene, sad or happy? Once you have set your mind to your destiny, take proactive steps and work towards it. Hiccups may occur along the way, but press on until you see the end result of your “movie”.

May your “movie” be a blockbuster that inspires and leaves a lasting impression for your audiences, for days, months or even years.

“In the future, everybody is going to be a director. Somebody’s got to live a real life so we have something to make a movie about.” – Cameron Crowe

The opinions expressed in this career guide are those of the writers or the people they quoted and not necessarily those of Leaderonomics.
By JOHAN MAHMOOD MERICAN
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THIS month, we finally get to watch the conclusion of The Hobbit film trilogy with the release of The Hobbit: The Battle of the Five Armies. However, for me, the Lord of the Rings (LOTR) Trilogy remains my favourite film and book trilogy. This is especially the case given that so much can be learnt on leadership from LOTR.

So in case you missed the lessons when you watched it the first time, do ask your boss for one day away from the office for leadership development, and from the comfy sofa of your home, watch the LOTR trilogy back-to-back. To help you out with your learning experience and especially if you have to write a report on your ‘training’ day, the following are parts you should look out for in the films.

1. CHOOSING TO LEAD
   Frodo: “I will take the Ring; though I do not know the way.”

   We have been conditioned, probably by society, possibly by typical Hollywood movies that leaders are born, and are heroes by virtue of being the smartest, bravest, strongest or all of the above. The beauty of LOTR is that Frodo is none of this – he has not the wisdom of Elrond, the courage of Boromir, the skill in battle of Legolas nor Gandalf’s magical power.

   Yet among the great people assembled for the Council of Elrond, it was Frodo who stepped up and volunteered to take the Ring on the quest to Mount Doom (despite not knowing how).

   Leadership has been defined in many ways. One particular definition which appeals to me is that there are two parts that define a leader.

   The first part is unhappiness with status quo or the situation at hand. On this, almost all of us, especially Malaysians can lay claim to having the first part.

   However, what distinguishes leaders is the second part, which is when the unhappy individual decides and commits their entire self and energy towards effecting a change for the better.

   Viewed this way, leadership is a choice. But it is not a half-hearted option of “let me try first and see”. A true leader commits to doing what it takes to make a difference.

   Frodo inspires us that anyone can choose to be a leader, though at the same time, that choice is not without difficulties, challenges and risk.

   Frodo: I wish the Ring had never come to me. I wish none of this had happened.

   Gandalf: So do all who live to see such times. But that is not for them to decide. All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given to us.

   In the above exchange, Gandalf reinforces the point on choice. Leaders cannot adopt a victim mentality of bemoaning how the world seems to be against them.

   Leaders focus on what they can do, making the most of what they have. True to Gandalf’s wisdom – time is often our most precious resource.

   Gandalf’s advice is reminiscent of how Dumbledore counsels Harry Potter, “It is our choices, Harry, that show what we truly are, far more than our abilities.” (Harry Potter film is another option for a great “leadership training day”)

2. STRENGTH OF FELLOWSHIP
   Legolas: And you have my bow.
   Gimli: And my axe.
   Boromir: You carry the fate of us all, little one. If this is indeed the will of the Council, then Gondor will see it done.

   A leader may choose to make a difference but rarely can an individual achieve much alone.

   The key to leadership is to build a team, ideally a diverse team bringing the different skills needed, but a team united in sharing common goals and values.

   LOTR emphasises a strong sense of fellowship. Where a diverse motley crew of individuals come together to save Middle Earth and despite their differences, they remain committed to each other and to the cause.

   Sam: I made a promise, Mr Frodo. A promise. “Don’t you leave him Samwise Gamgee.” And I don’t mean to. I don’t mean to.

   J.R.R. Tolkien’s inspiration for Sam is a reflection from World War I where an officer would be supported by a servant or “batman”.

   Though typically differentiated by class, there were close and loyal bonds ofship between the leader (officer) and team members (footsoldiers).

   Throughout LOTR, success is achieved through the unwavering loyalty to each other and a willingness to forsake one’s own self-interest (and safety) for the common cause.

   Eomer: We cannot achieve victory through strength of arms.

   Aragorn: Not for ourselves. But we can give Frodo his chance if we keep Sauron’s Eye fixed upon us. Keep him blind to all else that moves.

   Legolas: A diversion.

   Gimli: Certainty of death, small chance of success... What are we waiting for?

> TURN TO PAGE 4
> FROM PAGE 3

In the exchange, the team agrees to sacrifice themselves to fight an unwinnable battle in order to help Frodo and ultimately, to destroy the Ring. As they march into certain death, Aragorn rallies his troops: “Sons of Gondor, of Rohan, my brothers! I see in your eyes the same fear that would take the heart of me. A day may come when the courage of men fails, when we forsake our friends, and break all bonds of fellowship; but it is not this day! An hour of wolves, and shattered shields, when the Age of Men comes crashing down; but it is not this day! This day we fight!”

Whilst we do not expect anyone to sacrifice their lives for the organisation’s objectives, the ability of leaders to communicate a common purpose and align the organisation to a common goal, to the extent of inspiring one’s team to take ownership of the mission and willingly go the extra mile, is a great key to true leadership.

Despite LOTR involving many battles, the leaders are characterised as having compassion and not taking lives needlessly. As it happens, Bilbo showing mercy to Gollum, a character seemingly undeserving of mercy, ultimately saves the day. Tolkien takes pains to develop Aragorn’s character as not a two-dimensional killing machine in battle but also defines him as a healer (where he plays a key role in Eowyn’s recovery). This is in line with situational leadership, being able to take lives and save lives accordingly.

Hence, we are reminded, to truly care for our people in the organisation, whilst preserving our values.

4. PERSEVERANCE

Galadriel: You are a Ring-bearer, Frodo. To bear a Ring of Power is to be alone. This task was appointed to you, and if you do not find a way, no one will.

Frodo: I know what I must do, it’s just that... I’m afraid to do it.

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As depicted above, a leader’s path is not easy. It can be a lonely and difficult journey, where leaders will often doubt themselves. Beyond compassion, there is a core of compassion shown by Aragorn above. He is able to not just show total commitment to his friends but also able to forgive his enemies. In LOTR, Aragorn calls upon the Dead Men of Dunharrow, who had betrayed his forefathers and was able to convince them to help him and in return, he forgave them.

As with the dilemma faced by Frodo, it is often the case that we know what needs to be done. It is a question of whether, we can summon the leader in ourselves to make the difficult decisions and stay the course.

A key value of leadership epitomised in LOTR is perseverance – particularly, in the journey of Frodo and Sam, as they soldier on towards Mount Doom on a seemingly impossible mission. Persevere they did but at one of the points when all seemed lost, Sam and Frodo had the following exchange:

Sam: It’s like in the great stories Mr Frodo, the ones that really mattered. Full of darkness and danger they were, and sometimes you didn’t want to know the end because how could the end be happy?

How could the world go back to the way it was when so much bad had happened?

But in the end it’s only a passing thing this shadow, even darkness must pass. A new day will come, and when the sun shines it’ll shine out the clearer.

Those were the stories that stayed with you, that meant something even if you were too small to understand why. But I think Mr Frodo, I do understand, I know now folk in those stories had lots of chances of turning back, only they didn’t. They kept going because they were holding on to something.

Frodo: What are we holding onto, Sam?

Sam: That’s some good in the world, Mr Frodo, and it’s worth fighting for.

May that be the movie wisdom for us all. Embrace the leader in each of us by choosing to make a difference; rallying together with our teams; being compassionate, upholding integrity and ultimately persevering.

Johan Merican is CEO of TalentCorp. To send feedback, email editor@leaderonomics.com. For more leadership content, visit www.leaderonomics.com
According to Lee, it is from there that they learn the ropes on how a production set is run and managed. One, you can be promoted into the director’s team as an assistant director, that’s a good indication that you have the chops to become a filmmaker,” quips Lee. These days, Lee has been working a lot with younger people to share his knowledge with them, and vice versa. “You know, young people may lack the experience but the way they see things is always fascinating. At the same time, I hope to instill a healthier filmmaking culture, i.e. a culture of sharing, collaboration and respect among the people you work with.”

“IF YOU CAN BE PROMOTED INTO THE DIRECTOR’S TEAM AS AN ASSISTANT DIRECTOR, THAT’S A GOOD INDICATION THAT YOU HAVE THE CHOPS TO BECOME A FILMMAKER,” QUIPS LEE.

By Lim Lay Hsuan
layhsuan.lim@leaderonomics.com

I have always believed that Malaysia is never short in producing local-gone-global talents in various industries, including the movie industry, which incidentally is the focus of this week’s pullout. As challenging and arduous as it is to make good movies in Malaysia, I have to say that I admire individuals who continue to make independent films.

One such individual is James Lee Thim Heng, whose breakthrough film The Beautiful Washing Machine won the Best Asian Feature Film and FIPRESCI award at the Bangkok International Film Festival 2005, thus paving a way for the independent film movement in Malaysia. Tracking him down, I was grateful when Lee graciously responded and opened up about his journey as an independent filmmaker here in Malaysia.

THE STORYBOARD

“I was trained as a graphic designer but always had an interest in acting and directing. It prompted me to take up an acting course with Joe Hasham of The Actors Studio,” shares Lee of his background in the industry. “I later went into television productions doing Chinese drama series where I eventually picked up the art of filmmaking,” says the multitalented Lee, who also dabbles with acting, producing and writing, as well as taking on the role of a director of photography for other independent filmmakers.

Asked what sparked his passion for filmmaking, he responds, “Above all else, it was the love for the craft. Back in the early 1990s, filmmaking was an expensive affair, so the closest thing to directing was theatre, which I am still doing.”

“It is also an immense joy to be able to create a world of visuals and characters to convey a message and a story,” enthused Lee.

SETTING THE SCENE

According to Lee, he draws inspiration of great stories from real life events and news. He says that even a simple hangout session at the mamak can churn out inspirational ideas and concepts.

“One needs to be sincerely interested in the subject or character. You will need to do some investigative work during ideation and scriptwriting,” clarifies Lee, who has done a range of film genres himself, including horror and sci-fi films, which cater to a variety of audiences from different languages.

“The part I enjoy most about filmmaking is the opportunity to work with different people. I love the fact that by doing so, you learn to see things from different perspectives and angles,” says Lee.

AXIS OF ACTION

For someone outside looking in, I often wonder what is it like to be in a film director’s shoes (or rather, in this case, the director’s chair), except for the director to often say “action!” and “cut!”

“As a film director, I have to work closely with many stakeholders, including scriptwriters, actors, department heads of photography, art directors and stunts people. I also draw my own storyboard too,” explains Lee.

“Basically, I have to shoot and edit the whole movie in my mind during pre-production stage. In fact, it’s one of the most important stages in movie-making, but also the most overlooked one in the local scene,” says Lee.

On the types of skills needed to be a successful filmmaker, Lee says, “I believe one needs to be an attentive communicator, observer and listener. That is because a good director observes, listens and guides his or her actors, not through means of commanding or ordering.”

“The collaborative nature and involvement of everyone in the film is very important. That is why I personally think everyone on the set is a ‘filmmaker’ in his or her own right. They just work with me, not for me,” comments Lee.

When there is no filmmaking project, Lee occupies himself with reading, writing and gaming. He also thoroughly enjoys martial arts as it helps him with the grueling physical work demands of filmmaking.

POINT OF VIEW

On his thoughts about the future of film industry in Malaysia, he says: “A large chunk of the local market share has been taken by Hollywood movies. In a way, we do feel the pinch in terms of promotion and marketing.”

“Thus, it is a great challenge to compete in the old distribution system and model. Moreover, the censorship and the declining interest of Malaysians in local films are also discouraging the industry.”

To overcome these stumbling blocks, Lee advises filmmakers to continually seek and create another level-playing field where it will be more favourable to independent films.

“In fact, I actually left the conventional film industry in early 2013 and have since ventured and explored the online platform. “I have just completed the second season of short horror films comprising three stories by three directors, available on YouTube this month. There are other online projects in the pipeline too,” says Lee.

THE DIRECTOR’S CUT

“Start working in an actual production set at the lowest position, which is usually the production assistant, even though your aim may be directing,” says Lee to young and aspiring filmmakers.

According to Lee, it is from there that they learn the ropes on how a production set is run and managed. One, you can be promoted into the director’s team as an assistant director, that’s a good indication that you have the chops to become a filmmaker,” quips Lee. These days, Lee has been working a lot with younger people to share his knowledge with them, and vice versa. “You know, young people may lack the experience but the way they see things is always fascinating. At the same time, I wish Lee the best in all his endeavours, as I hope to follow the local film industry more closely.

“I HOPE TO INSTILL A HEALTHIER FILMMAKING CULTURE, I.E. A CULTURE OF SHARING, COLLABORATION AND RESPECT AMONG THE PEOPLE YOU WORK WITH.”

Lay Hsuan can’t help but listen to Radiohead’s Exit Music (for a Film) while writing this article. For feedback, write to her at editor@leaderonomics.com. For more insights on passionate people with unusual careers, visit www.leaderonomics.com
Here are three things I'd like to share:

1. As a leader, what do you think the music business is filled with cautionary tales of musicians who were absolute failures simply because they could not do the small, technical things that are necessary to become a successful musician. The ability to work with others and to be disciplined in your art (for example, showing up on time at shows, doing rehearsals professionally, delivering records to schedule) is just as crucial as your ability to nail a live performance. And just how illogical they are as entities at first impressions. As a leader, what do you think the
ternational teams. As a leader, what do you think

2. You don’t have to be close to
good music, but you have to be
close to a strong core.

There’s a misconception that for a band to be great, it has to be “family.” Yes, it’s not exactly a dissimilar concept, but it’s the truth, it’s not the “all or nothing” for a band. To make good music don’t require you to be great. It just requires you to be great musicians. As difficult, complex and troublesome as it may be, the magic that happens in a recording studio or live performance is made up of unique individuals from very diverse backgrounds, we never hung out, and not friendly spoke much beyond the rehearsal space. Before long, we broke up.

It is true that whether Mick Jagger makes it through a hellish Boston TV appearance, that the idea of musical bands consists of members who may or too little chest voice as an amplifier.

The voice you hear is totally different from what others hear. The ability to speak clearly, confidently, and convincingly, you may even have people design a recording. You may have invested a lot in per-

3. As a leader, do you have the voice

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SMALL CREATURES, BIG LESSONS

“EVERYTHING IS YOUR FAULT”

LEADERSHIP DOES NOT MEAN NEEDING TO ORDER OTHERS TO DO YOUR BIDDING, BUT RATHER BEING ABLE TO DRAW PEOPLE TO WORK TOGETHER WITH YOU.

By MILLIE ONG
millie.ong@leaderonomics.com

ONING beyond entertainment, movies have been used as a medium of education, inspiration and influence for many years. Many stories told on the silver screen allow individuals to identify with the messages, challenges and experiences being played out by the characters. Although it would seem that only movies featuring human characters would be able to bring forth this connection with the viewers, there are actually many stories to be learnt from films starring animal characters (and the animals themselves).

As we share this world with the animal kingdom, so do we, on the silver screen.

OH MY BUG!

One salient example is the 1998 Disney–Pixar animation, A Bug’s Life – a story offering leadership lessons on the screen and beyond it. It features the story of a misfit ant named Flik, who lost food offerings meant for predator grasshoppers who threaten the ant colony on a yearly basis.

To remedy the situation, Flik embarks on a journey to find warrior bugs to defend the colony against the grasshoppers who would ransack the ant’s food sources. Ultimately, Flik was able to defeat the grasshoppers despite mishaps and many other obstacles.

ACCOUNTABILITY

"First rule of leadership: Everything is your fault.” — A Bug's Life

The movie clearly highlights the responsibility an individual has when in a leadership position, and the need for accountability.

Anna, the ant-queen in training, took responsibility when the grasshoppers realised that there was no food offering, even though it had been Flik’s mistake that caused it. As the leader, she did not put the blame on him.

On the other hand, Flik was quick to admit his error and offered to rectify the situation by going out to recruit other bugs to protect the colony against the grasshoppers. Flik was not forced to do it, but instead he felt accountable for his actions.

Similarly, as key decision-makers, leaders should be ever-ready to bear the consequences of their actions – whether positive or negative.

INNOVATION

Flik is an inventor in the ant colony, constantly thinking of innovative ways to improve things. For example, he builds contraptions to harvest seeds faster, and ultimately crafted the plan to defeat the attacking grasshoppers. Likewise, leaders should have an ever-present attitude of improving things, and be willing to consider alternatives.

Flik demonstrates creativity by using available resources to maximise their functional value. Even when his ideas were rejected, Flik remained positive and continued trying.

No person is able to avoid failure in life, but he or she must be resilient towards challenges and obstacles that will inevitably occur. Even in the face of doubt, a leader must be confident in his or her abilities and ideas and push forward to reach goals.

HUMILITY

Most importantly, none of the “leaders” in the movie were heroes from the get-go. Flik started out as the misunderstood member of the colony and struggled to be accepted by the other ants. He had to overcome multiple obstacles in persuading others to buy into his ideas, recover from his own failures and present workable solutions before being recognised as a worthy leader.

True leaders cannot expect to be given respect and power without earning them by showcasing their competence.

Flik gained his status as a leader not through a prescribed role, but rather through demonstrating his leadership capabilities to the colony. He was seen persuading the circus troupe to remain with the ant colony, by presenting an idea to defeat the grasshoppers without putting themselves in harm’s way. Flik is a good listener and actively tries to motivate the other ants around him, regardless of whether they are baby ants or functional members of the colony.

He showcases to the other ants that he is willing to listen, and is enthusiastic in his actions. A strong leader leads not by power, but by example — acting as a role model to his/her followers.

GI-ANTS IN CHARACTERS

A Bug’s Life may be a fictional story, but the ant characters are bursting with leadership lessons. Slightly different from the movie, ants are actually able to function in large groups to complete tasks without any leader showing them the way.

Each ant serves as a contributor to the larger group – getting organised to meet common goals.

Ants are highly dependent and trusting of each other to accomplish their tasks, making decisions as a group rather than as individuals.

As a leader, one should be trusting of one’s followers to be able to deliver what is required – with the understanding that nothing can be accomplished alone.

Instead, leveraging on the strengths of the people around you helps build synergy that can far exceed the sum of singular efforts of individuals.

Ants are hardworking, diligent and disciplined – traits that help them overcome seemingly immovable odds like carrying items many times their size.

The work ethics of ants are traits that any leader should also embody as prerequisites to success and productivity. Moreover, ants are extremely adaptable to change.

Research has shown that ants are also able to regroup and change course when their original paths are interrupted.

This quick adaptability and flexibility to change is crucial to a leader as we exist in what is known as a VUCA (volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous) world.

Leaders find themselves in need of making decisions and taking actions within a VUCA environment.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

From the ants in A Bug’s Life to their real-life counterparts, it is evident that individuals can gain leadership lessons from many different sources.

It is often the case that leadership lessons are attainable from any situation and the unlikeliest of places, given the motivation to seek them as a learning point. Even insects, fictional or real, can become sources of inspiration for developing a person to become a better leader.

Insects may live simple and less complex lives, but are able to engage in organised activities and “perform” to a significant extent.
HAULING from Colombia, South America, Eduardo Pena is one of Hollywood’s blockbuster concept designers. Having worked on big names such as The Hobbit, Hercules, Transcendence, and Lucy, it was evident that the Leaderonomics media team was buzzing with excitement when given the opportunity to interview him.

WHEN IT ALL STARTED

Pena said when he was a little boy, he would draw whatever that appeared in front of him. In a recent question and answer session, Pena shared his thoughts and art with us.

Where do you get your inspiration from?

My first hero and my master was and is my dad. He introduced me to this magnificent art of just drawing something. But inspiration — something that I rely on constantly — is something that is outside of me, rather than inside, so I just perceive that inspiration comes from the outside all the time. For example, with simple things like food, or events, or things happening.

Do you have a favourite artist?

I cannot answer that question; it’s like saying you love food, but you don’t have a favourite food, because all food have different values.

So for me, there’s no favourite artist – everyone has different values. I love the values in all of them.

Is there a comparison between digital and traditional art?

Traditional or digital, both of them have different values, but at the end of the day they are both tools — they are not just the “tools”. You are the “doer” but you use the tools to make that happen.

One of them will have an advantage over the other, of course, but it depends on why you are using it.

At the end of the day, it is an extension, a tool, but they work for the same person.

So, the important thing is the idea, not the tool.

What software and hardware do you use to produce your art?

I say “handship” is the first Photoshop that you use. The first software is the head, and you have your hardware which is your hand and all that stuff.

I usually just use basic Photoshop — it could be the latest one, it could be an old one. It doesn’t matter. It has the same tools. The software is not important. What I really use — what is really important — is finding a good space and having good ideas to develop what you want to do.

Speaking of space, how does one develop a working culture where world-class design work can happen?

Actually, it’s not developing the culture, because the culture already exists. It’s more about stimulating the culture to create their own way of work.

So we don’t have to look at all the time outside of us, like, “I would like to work there”, I would prefer to say “I would like to work and develop something here” because inspiration is around me.

Most of your artwork is dark and gritty. Why is that so?

Most of your art interpretation comes from where you are from, and the city where I came from is Bogota, which is sometimes very cloudy or sometimes very foggy. Since I was very young, I fell in love with that.

So that goes inside the DNA, goes inside my brain and while I was growing up, I think I had to manifest that at some stage.

And this stage is just my pictures, so that’s a reflection of my love, or my reflections of my ambitions, so it turns into that sort of mood and ambience.

It’s not because I’m a dark person — it’s not something like that. It could be related, but it’s not. It’s more about things that come as a heritage from myself. It’s the way I perceive my ambitions, so it turns into that sort of mood and ambience.

So whatever we see today on the screen — are you the one who’s behind the whole concept?

When you work in a production, there’s no individual, it’s always a collective. It’s like different people working for one sole purpose.

There’s one director, of course, guiding and compiling all these talents with different expertise from around the world, and all these people create a product. So, I was part of that.

It’s like a constant discussion — a dialogue — between different ideas. It’s not just one idea — everyone is part of building this world.

Do you face any difficulties dealing with different movie directors or studios?

That happens all the time — when you turn art into a product, you call it design. So you have to, in some way, have a dialogue and create art in a way that this art can be “production-able” and can fit into a marketing environment.

So there are a lot of issues — personal issues as an artist, and creative issues. But there’s always a balance of how you can fit those sort of ideas into this world. That’s why you’re an artist and you’re a designer.

You’ve constantly being challenged to produce something that keeps inspiring people but at the same time can fit into the marketing or marketable world.

That’s why I choose movies, because movies have a manifestation of all senses — you can see, you can taste, you can smell, you can feel.

Just by watching one movie, you can have all these senses together. You can feel the pain, you can feel despair, you can feel happiness.

What challenges have you faced, and do you believe in learning from failure?

Of course. There’s no such thing as learning from success. The more you fail, the more you learn.

Actually, as a teacher, I always stimulate my students to fail more, because nowadays society thinks that failure is bad, though failure is a normal part of the process.

The more you fail, the more you understand yourself.

If you had one piece of advice to youth who aspire to be like you, what would it be?

Follow your passion — it’s the flame of magic, because we have to believe that magic exists. If you don’t have magic, this thing cannot work for you, because you need to constantly be in touch with that sort of power to be inspired.

Live the dream, don’t just think about the dream.

INSPIRATION — SOMETHING THAT I RELY ON CONSTANTLY — IS SOMETHING THAT IS OUTSIDE OF ME, RATHER THAN INSIDE, SO I JUST PERCEIVE THAT INSPIRATION COMES FROM THE OUTSIDE ALL THE TIME. FOR EXAMPLE, WITH SIMPLE THINGS LIKE FOOD, OR EVENTS, OR THINGS HAPPENING.

CLOSING WORDS

“I’ve never separated design from life. For me, design is more spiritual and is more holistic. I relate my life with design. Design for me is not just working nine to six — design is everything to me. I talk with design, I live with design, I cry with design. In the way I speak, I speak with design,” he said.

“It’s just a way of life for me.”
THE INK THING... YAY OR NAY?

SPOTLIGHT ON BODY ART

By WENDY LEE
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I was narrating my experience of how I got my upper eyelids tattooed to my workshop participants the other day, when someone asked, “why is it okay to have one’s eyebrows and eyeliner tattooed, but when it comes to other parts of our body, it’s still a big no-no?”

Hrm.. I’ve never seen it from that angle before. For something that has been in existence since the beginning of mankind (with the discovery of Otzi, the iceman with tattoos found frozen in a glacier some 5,000 years ago), body art has never quite made its way to becoming socially acceptable.

Unlike ornaments like headgear, used primarily to symbolise status and hierarchy, tattoos, which are also a form of accessory, have been labelled both good and bad depending on the cultures associated with it.

The Maoris in New Zealand, for example, believe that a person’s spiritual power or life force is displayed through tattoos, whereas the Japanese Mafia use tattoos to symbolise which Yakuza syndicate they belong to. Those who are familiar with Chinese history would also know the words jin zhong bao guo (to serve your country with ultimate loyalty), carved on the back of a Chinese general Yueh Fei, by his own mother.

While I have not come across any patriots pricking flags on their bodies, I certainly do see more and more corporate executives sporting tattoos.

Is body art now more acceptable in the workplace?
Do they still impact a person socially and professionally, negatively in this time and age?

Louise Phua's tattoo

TO INK OR NOT TO INK?

So, to the question whether tattoos are acceptable at work, I’ll like to sum it all in one sentence: You can’t have your cake and eat it, too.
Like it or not, body art and body piercing still carry a stigma in this society, especially in the Asian context.

Bear in mind that when you are out seeking employment, it’s no longer about you, but about how you can fulfil your employer’s requirements.

You are the brand ambassador of the organisation you are working for. Companies like banks or financial institutions are not just going to brush away the “dragons” on your arm. Even as entrepreneurs, where you have no one to report to, clients who look at your body art may conjure up negative images in their minds.

People may have an issue when it comes to trusting you. Thus, if you are someone who loves body art, do consider looking for jobs or venturing into businesses that allow you to have them.

Perception management is a big determining factor in your career or business paths. To me, there are many ways someone can express himself/herself as a unique individual — for example, trying various clothing styles, changing hair colours, and adorning different accessories.

If you really like to see how a tattoo looks on you, try it out with stickers instead. An impulsive decision in getting any body art may cause you more harm than good. Furthermore, it is said that the process of removing it is more painful (and expensive) than having it done.

So, if you are still itching to get a tattoo, I’d say, please... ponder before you prick and think before you ink!
THE CURIOUS CASE OF A CROSS-POLLINATOR

By KAREN NEOH
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LAST year, I was onboard a plane, watching a movie, when I suddenly had to stifle a squeal and a happy dance shuffle right there in the aisle.

There in the movie credits was a friend from many moons before.

David Kwong—whom I crowned my favourite Baby Din during the time he was part of the all-male college a cappella group, the Harvard Din and Tonics, was in the credits of a major Hollywood movie as the Head Magician Consultant.

How fantastic! And what was that anyway?

So, after a flurry of messages congratulating him and finding out what he had been doing with himself since he sang “The Periodic Table” song in school, I asked Kwong if he would be willing to share his story—especially for our youth searching to chart their future and make their mark in the world—without having access to that magic pumpkin patch which made all the difference!

SOME BACKGROUND

Do tell us about yourself, what you did before Harvard, and how you arrived at where you are today.

“I grew up in upstate New York, Rochester. My parents are both academics, so they made sure I always did my homework.

“I saw my first magician at a pumpkin patch when I was about six or seven years old. It was a pivotal moment for me because the magician didn’t just fool me—he fooled my father, the scientist.

“And to a young boy your father the biochemist knows EVERYTHING about the world. So when I saw that he didn’t know the secrets, I knew that I had to learn them!”

Kwong studied the history of magic at Harvard University (I hear my editorial team simultaneously go “Hogwarts!”)

He has uniquely combined his expertise in illusion and passion for film. As a veteran puzzle creator, Kwong has also constructed crossword puzzles for the New York Times, Los Angeles Times and other national publications in the United States. He frequently serves as a puzzle consultant for film and television.

“I designed some 1940s crossword puzzles for The Imitation Game, which comes out in November. I’ve also consulted on Ant-Man and Mission Impossible 5. I’m working on my one-man show almost every day.”

CORPORATE MAGIC-MEN

Imagine for a moment that you’re in the corporate world. How would you apply your incredible skills that you’ve amassed over the years: reading and connecting with people; connecting the dots, and seeing things others may not?

“Being a magician is all about being a step ahead of people. I try to assess a situation and figure out how I can work in advance of what is expected. Magic is also about taking risks but always having a backup plan.

“We try to pull off miracles but when they don’t work, we have a suitable plan B. And the best magicians make that plan B still sparkle!”

To which he responded, “I can’t tell you how many times I have interacted with that prove that we always have a backup plan.”

“Sigh!”

WORDS OF WISDOM

“If you have dreams, follow them. But it’s important to buttress those dreams with real-world skills and a broad education.

“I’m only the magician I am today because of the foundation I built in history, mathematics, and years of hard work in Hollywood.”

Beyond doctor, lawyer, engineer? What would be your advice to an aspiring magician or magic consultant?

“My advice to everyone is to seek out a broad liberal arts education, one that can provide you with a strong foundation for choice.

“I was able to take my career in a number of different directions because of the wide spectrum of skills I had amassed in school and in work.

“Cross-pollination is very important too. Every job you have or class you take is relevant. You must take those skills and apply them to other fields—this usually gives you a unique perspective on that new field.”

Then I thought to myself, “David’s a friend—maybe he’ll clue me in on that mind-blowing stunt he pulled during a recent Ted Talk?”

To which he responded, “I can’t tell you how it worked, but I will tell you that I planned it for four years. A magician is always one step ahead—sometimes years!”

Sigh!

“BEING A MAGICIAN IS ALL ABOUT BEING A STEP AHEAD OF PEOPLE. I TRY TO ASSESS A SITUATION AND FIGURE OUT HOW I CAN WORK IN ADVANCE OF WHAT IS EXPECTED. MAGIC IS ALSO ABOUT TAKING RISKS BUT ALWAYS HAVING A BACKUP PLAN”

“Gentlemen of the Road” tour with Mumford & Sons (Summer 2012 and 2013).

Performance and speech on creativity, film and illusion, and cross-pollinating areas of expertise in 2013 AIGA (American Institute of Graphic Arts) Design Conference.

Lectured on misdirection in Harvard Business School (Jan 16, 2014).


“I was able to cross-pollinate all these skills into the field of magic—which resulted in a brand new type of magic.

“Be open-minded and you will eventually find the right application for all of your skills!”

This is just one of many friends and people I have interacted with that prove that we always have something to learn (do’s AND don’ts!) from others. We just need to look out for the lessons!

Karen needs to pinch herself every so often to be assured her charmed life is real! Do send your feedback to editor@leaderonomics.com and check out other Starting Young articles at www.leaderonomics.com

MAGICIAN EXTRAORDINAIRE

TO keep you updated on Kwong’s adventures post-university, here’s a snippet of the few things that he has been up to!

TED Talk at TED’s 30th Anniversary Conference, Vancouver, Canada (March 2014).

Hollywood’s leading magic consultant—Now You See Me, The Incredible Burt Wonderstone, The Immigrant, and others.

Monthly performances at Soho Houses around the world.

“Gentlemen of the Road” tour with Mumford & Sons (Summer 2012 and 2013).

Performance and speech on creativity, film and illusion, and cross-pollinating areas of expertise in 2013 AIGA (American Institute of Graphic Arts) Design Conference.

Lectured on misdirection in Harvard Business School (Jan 16, 2014).

SELF-REFLECTION

LIFE LESSONS FROM MULAN

By SARAH TAN
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Exploring lessons from yet another fictional character, today we travel back in time to ancient China to look at one of Disney’s well known and well-loved animated characters Fa (or Hua) Mulan.

Inspired by a real legendary figure, Hua Mulan, people believe that the origins of this story are from a poem written about her, titled The Ballad of Mulan.

In this movie, Mulan takes her father’s place in war, as she fears his age and fragile health will be greatly disadvantageous to him.

Accompanied by her trusty horse named Khan, a little dragon named Mushu, and a lucky cricket named Cri Kee, she sets out to place in war, as she fears his age and fragile health will be greatly disadvantageous to him.

Accompanied by her trusty horse named Khan, a little dragon named Mushu, and a lucky cricket named Cri Kee, she sets out to war as her male alter ego Ping.

Mulan is someone with a great love for her country, she has filial piety, and a determined spirit – despite her headstrong and stubborn characteristics – and there are many things that we can learn from her.

Here are a few (warning spoilers ahead):

1. DON’T EVER LET LIMITATIONS STOP YOU

Mulan: No one will listen to me.

Mushu: Huh? I’m sorry, did you say something?

Mulan: Mushu!

Mushu: Hey, you’re a girl, again. Remember?

Fa Zhou: I am ready to serve the emperor.

Mulan: Father! You can’t go!

Fa Zhou: Mulan!

Mulan: (to the recruiter) Please, sir. My father has already fought for...

2. BRAVERY OPENS DOORS OF OPPORTUNITIES

In the famous scene of her transformation, Mulan is shown cutting her hair and putting on her father’s armour before going to war. While some people may depict Mulan as somebody who is eager to go out and fight, this may not be necessarily true at the outset.

Personally, this part of the movie showed me how a brave young woman took on a great task that could potentially have cost her her life, out of love for her father. Mulan’s act of bravery not only leads her to meet the man of her dreams and firm friends, but it plays a crucial role in saving China and bringing honour to the Fa family.

In life, sometimes all we need is the bravura to step up and act on things that we believe in, and maybe the doors of opportunity that have been closed will even open for us.

3. PERSEVERE THROUGH TOUGH TIMES AND NEVER GIVE UP

In yet another famous scene in the movie, Shang challenges his soldiers to climb up a tall wooden pole to retrieve an arrow that he shot to the top.

While everyone rose to the challenge, not everyone had the determination to see it through.

After a long day of training, all the trainee soldiers gave up and returned to their tents, with Shang telling Mulan to return home.

However, determined to accomplish the task, she stayed up all night to climb the pole, and eventually reached the top to retrieve the arrow.

All of us will face challenges in our lives – be it in the workplace, or in our own homes. Nonetheless, it is important to remember: don’t let them get the better of us, don’t give up.

4. BE CREATIVE AND THINK OUT OF THE BOX

(Mulan uses the last rocket, then points it at the mountain behind Shan Yu)

Mushu: from on top of the rocket as it soars away! You missed! How could you miss? He was three feet from you!

(The rocket hits the mountain and causes an avalanche)

In the battle scene at a mountain, the Hun army attacked Mulan and her troop. With only one rocket left as their means of attack, Yao gets prepared to fire it at Shan Yu who is leading his army.

However, Mulan innovatively handles this crisis by grabbing the rocket and firing it at a nearby mountain instead, causing an avalanche that buried the Hun army.

Nonetheless, it is important to remember: don’t let them get the better of us, don’t give up.

Be creative and think out of the Box